

VZCZCXRO4284
PP RUEHBC RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHRH #0153/01 0331347
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021347Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2432
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 4827
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0321
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN PRIORITY 0475
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0586
RUSBPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 0198

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000153

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2020
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [AF](#) [PK](#)
SUBJECT: PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL ON AFGHANISTAN,
COUNTERTERRORISM

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a meeting on January 30, Ambassador Smith and Prince Turki Al-Faisal--former GIP Head and Ambassador to the U.S., and current Chairman of the Board of the King Faisal Center-- discussed ways to further strengthen the U.S.- Saudi bilateral relationship; Saudi Arabia's Afghanistan lessons learned, and how the U.S. might use these to achieve our current goals; the Saudis' counterterrorism strategy; and why Islamic extremism surprised the Saudis. Originally scheduled as a brief courtesy call, the meeting lasted over an hour as the Prince candidly shared his insider's view on these and other topics of U.S.-Saudi interest. His daughter, Princess Masha'el, joined her father and the Ambassador for part of the meeting. END SUMMARY.

PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

¶2. (U) Thanking the Ambassador for his visit, Prince Turki noted that the Saudi-American relationship had always been driven by warm personal relationships at the highest levels. While these relationships continued, lower-level, people-to-people exchanges were now of growing importance. During his time in the U.S., first as a student and later as the Saudi Ambassador, he had made a concerted effort to travel widely and engage Americans outside of the nation's capital. He hoped Ambassador Smith would be able to do the same in Saudi Arabia.

TRUST BREEDS COOPERATION...

¶3. (C) Ambassador asked for Prince Turki's thoughts regarding the current U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship, focusing on ways we might be able to intensify our cooperation on issues of common interest, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Middle East Peace. Turki observed that Saudi-U.S. cooperation and collaboration reached an unusual peak during the 80's and 90's, when he worked as GIP Head, but that the relationship remained very close. The consultations between the King and President Obama were a reflection of this closeness, he said, adding that the leaders "had a level of trust in one another" that inspired cooperation.

...EVEN IN AFGHANISTAN

14. (C) Focusing on Afghanistan, Turki shared some Saudi lessons learned. Afghanistan was a "puzzle," with a "peculiarly Afghan" organizational structure that the Saudis had difficulty making sense of. In his view, establishing trust with Afghan leaders had been the key to the Saudis' success at the time, as was recognizing the links between Pakistan and the Taliban. All financial aid to the Taliban government was conditional, with the Saudis unwilling to hand anything over until the fighting had stopped. The same thing was needed in Afghanistan today-- benchmarks for the leadership must be set, and aid must be withheld until these are met. Recent Saudi efforts to assist in Taliban mediation had failed, he said, when "both sides fell short." Karzai had asked for Saudi help, but let them down when he began readying for elections instead of following through with the mediation process.

PUT THE FOCUS BACK ON BIN LADEN

15. (C) The Taliban leadership was now fractured, Turki continued. The media labeled anyone fighting against NATO or the U.S. as "Taliban," but many were simply crooks, drug dealers, gangsters or terrorists that profited from the country's instability. The U.S. and NATO needed to target these criminal elements more vociferously. Further, we needed to re-focus our attention on capturing Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri. The people harboring them were not doing so for ideological or even financial reasons, Turki insisted, but simply because there was no longer any real

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cost to doing so. "Since 2003, Bin Laden has been comfortable...he has had time to plan operations" such as the Christmas bombing attempt. He suggested Saudi Arabia, the U.S., China, Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan could join forces and share assets in order to capture or kill bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri. This would break the terrorists' "aura of invincibility" and allow the U.S. to "declare victory" and move on.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

16. (C) All things considered, the U.S. response to 9/11 was relatively measured, said Turki. If the same thing had occurred anywhere else, the world would have expected to see far more violent reprisals. The Saudis had learned from the American response to 9/11, and "resisted the trap" of retaliating in a way that would only generate more hatred. He credited Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohamed bin Nayif for developing the Kingdom's innovative counterterrorism program, and winning support for it from his father, Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abdulaziz, the Crown Prince, and the King. The strategy required patience, but the King was willing to wait.

IN RETROSPECT, WRITING WAS ON THE WALL

17. (C) Turki then discussed the 1979 siege of the Great Mosque in Mecca, observing that he--and the rest of the Saudi leadership--had a blind spot when it came to believing someone could do something so violent in the name of Islam. In retrospect, the signs that a problem had been brewing were clear. He took issue with the thesis that the event marked the birth of Al-Qaeda, claiming the siege and Al-Qaeda were different phenomena. Juhayman was driven by a misreading of theology that Bin Laden considered apostasy, while Bin Laden suffered from megalomania.

COMMENT

18. (C) The Ambassador's meeting with Prince Turki, originally scheduled as a short courtesy call, lasted more than an hour as the Prince spoke candidly about lessons learned during his years as a pillar of the Saudi foreign policy establishment. While he insisted that he had been out of government for two and a half years, and was thus speaking from his outsider's perch, Turki appeared well-briefed on the official Saudi position and eager to share his opinions with the Ambassador and other USG officials. END COMMENT.

SMITH